

A FICTIONAL PLATOON-LEVEL SCENARIO IN THE LIBYAN DESERT

BIR ACHIN

In Operation Compass, launched in December 1940, British and Commonwealth troops launched a series of attacks against Italian troops in Egypt and Cyrenaica. The British Western Desert Force launched a lightning raid against the Italian Tenth Army around Sidi Barrani in western Egypt. Organised into fast-moving 'Jock' columns made up of tanks and motorised infantry, the British captured over 100,000 prisoners while only suffering light casualties.

By Mark Backhouse

The following scenario at Bir Achin hopes to capture a fairly typical experience of one of those British columns when they came up against some fiercer resistance than normal. The scenario could be played out using whichever platoon-level WW2 rules you want and can be easily converted for *Crossfire*, *Cross of Iron*, *Bolt Action* or *Chain of Command*, to name just a few, with some simple tweaks. It is also not restricted to 1940 and could be tweaked for one of the later British offensives from 1941 to 1943.

The game is designed to be played by two players per side, although can easily be broken down into more commands if more people want to play. A games master will be a helpful asset to help the scenario

play smoothly, but is not a prerequisite. The British column has one understrength platoon of cruiser tanks and one platoon of motorised infantry mounted on trucks. The Italians have one platoon of infantry with a few additional assets as well as a number of prepared positions. The exact figures can easily be substituted to fit your specific available figures; indeed, with a small amount of tweaking to the setting, they could be altered to represent different nationalities.

THE BRITISH PLAYERS

The British have been given orders to attack Bir Achin, a small Libyan village about thirty miles outside of Sidi Barrani. The village is being held by just a single platoon of Italian troops, but has made some preparations for her defence. The speed and ferocity of your attack should



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easily overwhelm these poorly motivated defenders, however.

Lieutenant Timothy Forsyth-Smith Pltn. commander of the cruiser tanks

A budding law student from the Home Counties before the war, Timothy is a well-spoken product of the public school system. He tends to view the Italians as a cultured but soft sort who will happily surrender once reminded firmly. He has a fondness for good-quality Italian wine and gramophone records of operatic music. His platoon has suffered two lost tanks, both from breakdowns, but has so far come through the war with little in the way of serious combat save for the occasional attack from Italian aircraft. He is a cautious commander who is keen to make sure his tank, 'Arabella', and his crew of likeable chaps makes it through the war unscathed. He has a grudging respect for Sergeant Edwards and the experience he has gathered in his earlier campaigning.

↖ A British 6-pdr anti-tank gun and crew in the Western Desert during November 1942.





Sempre Avanti Italia! Credere! Obbedire! Combattere!

Personal victory points:

- +1 for every Italian prisoner who can be captured rather than killed or injured.
- +5 if he can 'liberate' any fine wines or Italian opera records.
- -10 for every tank lost from his platoon.
- -5 if any tanks in his platoon come under direct and accurate Italian anti-tank gun fire (regardless of whether this penetrates the armour or not).
- +5 if he can use his skills as a trainee barrister to negotiate a peaceful solution to any stalemate situation.

Under his command he has:

- 'Arabella' – a cruiser tank led by Forsyth-Smith himself
- 'Badajoz' – a cruiser tank led by Sergeant Thompson
- 'Betsy' – a cruiser tank led by Sergeant Macdonald.

All cruiser tank crews are inexperienced with average morale.

Sergeant Eric Edwards Pltn. commander of the motorised infantry platoon

A member of the Territorial Army before the war, Eric is a no-nonsense and resourceful platoon commander from Birmingham. He took command of the platoon after the recent death of the respected platoon commander Lieutenant Smedley in an Italian aerial attack. He regards the Italians as poorly led, and his experience of them in early encounters is that, while their men will put up a fierce fight if forced to, they will surrender when pressed. His platoon has suffered some early losses, but fresh replacements have been sent to fill most of the gaps. He is a capable platoon commander who is respected by his men and by the attached tanks of Lieutenant Forsyth-Smith, but feels a successful action against the Italians here at Bir Achin would do wonders to cement his position and build the confidence of the fresh replacements.

Personal victory points:

- +1 for every Italian killed, captured, or injured.
- +5 if his platoon conducts itself well under fire and is praised at the end of the game by Forsyth-Smith. This can be doubled to +10 if Edwards comes in for personal praise.
- -10 if any section in his platoon breaks under fire or in close combat.
- +3 if his inexperienced section gains some useful experience without heavy losses. Examples of this might be that they receive and return fire, engage in melee or the cap-



ture of Italian troops, or complete a tactically challenging manoeuvre such as cutting barbed wire entanglements or making a passageway through a minefield under fire.

Under his command he has:

- **Command section**
Sergeant Edwards, SMG, with radio operator and two riflemen; Two-man 'Boys' anti-tank team; One man with 2" mortar.
- **1st Squad**
Corporal Tyrone, rifle, with five-man rifle team; Lance-corporal Telford, rifle, with two-man Bren team.
- **2nd Squad**
Corporal Rackham, rifle, with five-man rifle team; Lance-corporal Gilbert, rifle, with two-man Bren team.
- **3rd Squad**
Corporal Shipley, rifle, with five-man rifle team; Lance-corporal Bury, rifle, with two-man Bren team.

All troops in the platoon count as experienced with good morale, with the exception of 3rd Squad who count as inexperienced with shaky morale. The platoon is mounted in

two to three trucks. They may choose to dismount prior to the game if the British player wishes.

THE ITALIAN FORCES

The Italian garrison at Bir Achin is well led and has the capacity to hold out and defeat any overconfident British attacks. The NCOs and some of the platoon have fought in the subjugation of Libya and also Abyssinia, gaining valuable experience of tactical movement under fire. Their platoon commander is a confident and ambitious political zealot who will not allow his men to dishonour their reputation as fighting men.

**Lieutenant Antonio Bruno
Pltn. commander of the
Italian infantry platoon**

An enthusiastic blackshirt member of the Fascist Party from Milan, Antonio has been newly promoted to a commission in the army. He has been a Balilla youth leader and is keen to show his fanaticism to inspire his brave men. Some of his men don't quite show the same degree of enthusiasm for 'El Duce', but with the correct inspiration will fight well. He has heard that the English are soft tea-drinkers and will have no stomach for a fight.



The only British he fears are the wild and tough Scots troops who terrify his nightmares (not that he needs to let his troops know this!) He has been given a radio warning of an impending British attack from a small mechanised group and has energetically started to prepare the defences around Bir Achin.

Personal victory points:

- +1 for every British soldier killed or injured, and +3 for every British soldier captured, because it re-enforces his beliefs about soft English troops!
- +10 if he can inspire his platoon with a suitable act of

DEPLOYMENT

Two squads of the Italian troops should be deployed in and around the buildings in Bir Achin along with any number of supporting sections at position A. The Italians may place up to one of their infantry squads with a supporting section along the high ground within 24" of point B. They may prepare their position with concealed slit trenches and foxholes. Up to two sections or supporting sections may be kept off table and brought in as a reserve guarding the rear route into the town. They may be brought on from point C. The Italian troops deployed in each section should be allocated in each area, regardless of the rule system you use to actually 'show' them on the table.

The British forces will arrive from any point of their choice along the British baseline, although in the desert



navigation is not always so straightforward! Roll 1d6; on a roll of 5-6 any troops deploying this turn have become a little lost and have attacked along a slightly different axis of attack than expected. Deploy them 24"

away from your chosen point along the table edge in either a clockwise or anticlockwise direction (roll 1d6; 1-3 clockwise, 4-6 anticlockwise). This might allow them to enter from a completely different board edge.



The Royal Corps of Colonial Troops.



A 'mighty' column of Italian armour advances.

personal heroism, e.g. leading a bayonet charge, personally sighting an anti-tank gun that destroys a British tank, or capturing a British section in hand-to-hand fighting.

- -10 if he displays a lack of courage or leadership at the critical moment, e.g. running away or being captured due to a morale failure.

Under his command he has:

- Command section
Lieutenant Bruno, SMG, with radio operator and one rifleman; 20 mm anti-tank gun and crew, commanded by Corporal Siciliano.
- 1st Section
Sergeant Gabbiadini, rifle, with ten-man rifle team; Lance-corporal Russo, rifle, with eight-man rifle team including two LMGs.
- Tank support
Corporal Fazio with a single M13/40 tank.

All these troops count as experienced and confident (or fanatical if Bruno has attached himself to them).



Sergeant Giuseppe Esposito Experienced NCO of the Italian infantry platoon

A southerner and a conscript during the war with Abyssinia, Sergeant Esposito was never a natural military soldier; he was poorly educated and disliked army discipline. In Abyssinia, however, he found he had an aptitude for tactics and for understanding the natural terrain to the best advantage, and was quickly promoted. He lacks the enthusiasm for the fascist regime that Bruno has attempted to create in the platoon. Esposito's cynicism is shared by the majority of his men, who are peasant recruits. The British are tough enemies who command his respect; they will prove considerably tougher opposition than the Abyssinian tribesmen he has fought in the past.

Personal victory points:

- +2 for every British soldier captured or broken due to morale failure.
- +1 for every two men from his squads in the platoon that he manages to keep alive and uninjured during the battle. (Note, they may be captured alive by the British and still claim the points.)
- +5 for keeping intact and uncaptured his luxuries from home, including his 'colourful' postcards, personal letters, and gramophone collection.
 - +3 for maintaining outward obedience towards

Lieutenant Bruno (even if he dislikes his orders!)

Under his command he has:

- 2nd Section
Sergeant Esposito, SMG, with ten-man rifle team; Lance-corporal with eight-man rifle team including two LMGs.
- HMG section
Lance-corporal Conti, with three-man HMG team.

All troops in the platoon count as experienced with average morale.

TERRAIN

Bir Achin is a small village made up of half a dozen adobe-style buildings. There is a well and a flagpole boldly flying the Italian flag in the centre of the town. The buildings provide good cover for infantry defenders, but are not loop-holed.

A dusty track runs from one end of the board through the town out to the other side. Off the tracks, the land is arid and littered with small rocks and bushes that will provide occasional spots of light cover for infantry.

About a third of the way on to the table, the terrain raises into a steeper rugged ridge that would give a considerable vantage over the village. The large number of rocks provide light cover for troops along this ridge. The rugged terrain on the ridge is very difficult going for tanks due to how steep it is and the large number of big rocks. Tanks should roll each turn to see if they can move, with



Enemy column successfully engaged by British Armour.

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a roll of '1' on a d6 indicating that they have become stuck.

A dry riverbed runs from the hillside down into the town. This provides good cover for infantry but provides an obstacle for tanks trying to cross it, as again they might become stuck.

SPECIAL RULES

Prepared ground – Bruno has heard reports of the British advance. He may choose to do any two of the following things before the game:

Place two 6"-long sections of barbed-wire entanglements guarding the approach to the town. These can be secretly mapped and are deployed once British troops come within 'rifle'-effective range of them. They may not block the road.

Secretly deploy one 4" x 8" section of anti-personnel mines or 4" x 4" section of anti-tank mines anywhere 'reasonable' on the table. (This cannot be in the town itself and it cannot block the main road as the Italian army will need to be using it for themselves!)

Loophole and dig in to a building providing enough cover for one squad or

supporting section, turning it from good cover into a fortified position.

Dig in one section into camouflaged rifle pits and foxholes. These can be detected only when British soldiers come within close rifle range or the troops in them open fire.

Give one section improvised anti-tank bombs or Molotov cocktails.

Bruno the fanatic - Any section that Lieutenant Bruno is attached to will improve their morale to fanatical, representing his blood-curdling war cries and fascist rhetoric inspiring his men.

Gramophone records and 'colourful' photographs – Allocate one building (or possibly tent model) close to where Sergeant Esposito deploys from. This houses his personal collection of luxuries, which are significant for some of the personal victory points in the game.

Reserves – Either side may bring in reserves later in the game, which have been kept off table. If a player wishes to bring them on, roll 1d6. On a roll of 4+ they may deploy that turn; if the roll is failed they

must try again next turn. British reserves need to dice to see if they arrive in the correct place (see deployment rules earlier). Italian reserves arrive from point C.

WINNING THE GAME

I would suggest playing for as many turns as you have time for, but setting a pre-decided time limit for your rules will help. The Italians win if they manage to break the British morale and maintain control of Bir Achin. The British win if they manage to break the Italian morale and capture the town. Having a British infantry section lower the Italian flag in the centre of the town is a symbolic gesture that the town has been captured!

Any other result with a still-contested town by the end of play is considered a draw.

More importantly, players should also try to work out their own personal victory points. They might find that their character has been on the losing side but has won a personal victory by the way that they have played! **WS&S**